The book cover features a dark, textured background. At the top, the title 'THE SHIELD OF HORATIUS' is written in a large, golden, serif font. Below the title, the subtitle 'A MOLLY & MICHAEL MYSTERY' is written in a smaller, golden, serif font. The central focus is a collage of four characters: a young woman with long brown hair and green eyes in a yellow shirt, a young man with dark hair in a blue shirt, a young woman with blonde hair and blue eyes in a green shirt, and a young man with dark hair in a purple shirt. A large, circular shield with a red border and a yellow center is positioned behind the characters. The shield contains a golden figure of a person on a pedestal. In the bottom right corner, there is a white, stylized logo that reads 'M&M'.

A MOLLY & MICHAEL MYSTERY

CHRIS OLER

THE
SHIELD
OF
HORATIUS

A MOLLY & MICHAEL MYSTERY

BY CHRIS OLER

COVER ART BY AMY HOUSTON OLER

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ROMAN EMPERORS MENTIONED IN THE STORY

27 BC-14 AD Augustus

54-68 Nero

79-81 Titus

81-96 Domitian

98-117 Trajan

117-138 Hadrian

161-180 Marcus Aurelius

180-192 Commodus

198-211 Septimus Severus
(joint rule with Caracalla 198-211)

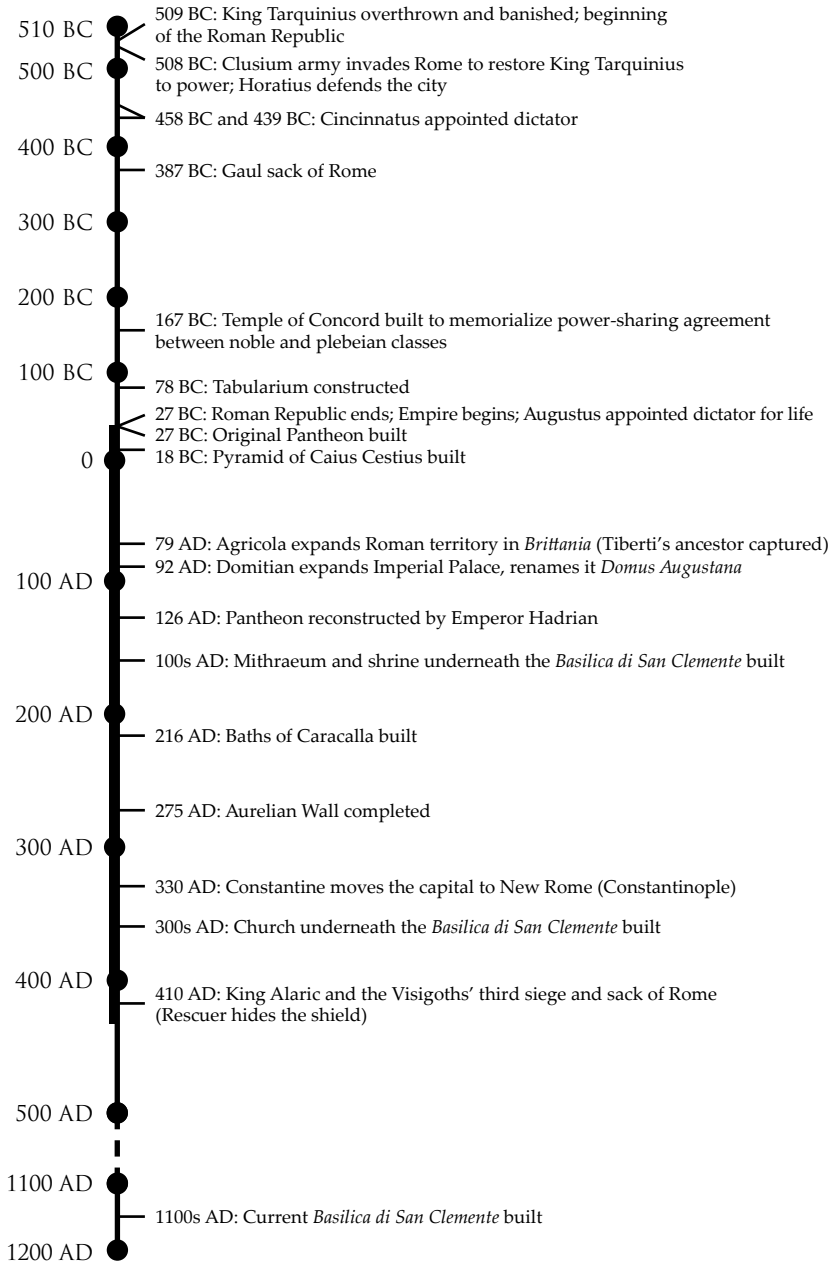
198-217 Caracalla
(joint rule with Septimus Severus 198-211)

270-275 Aurelian

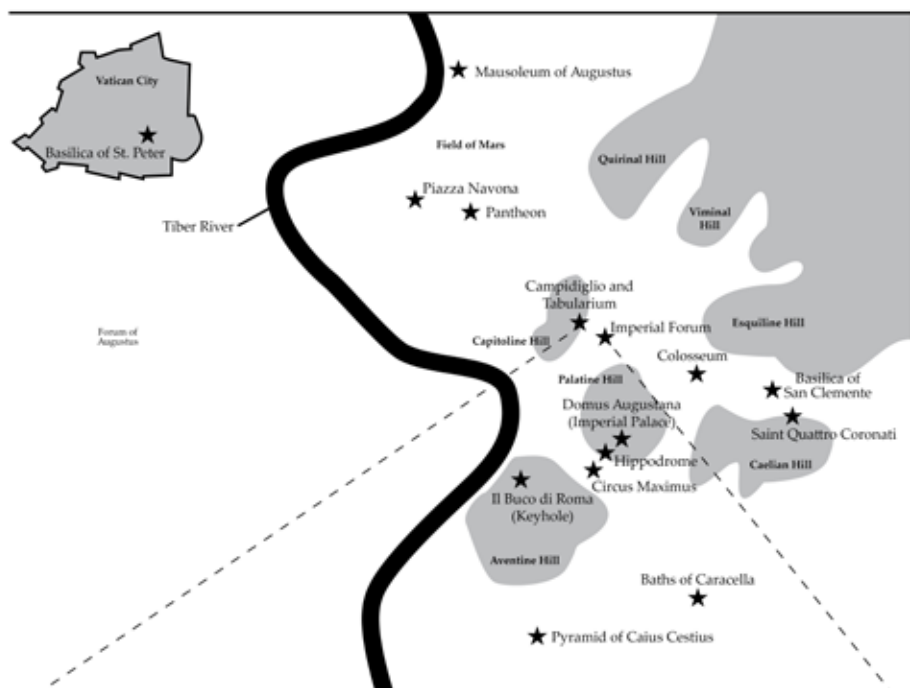
306-337 Constantine

395-423 Honorius

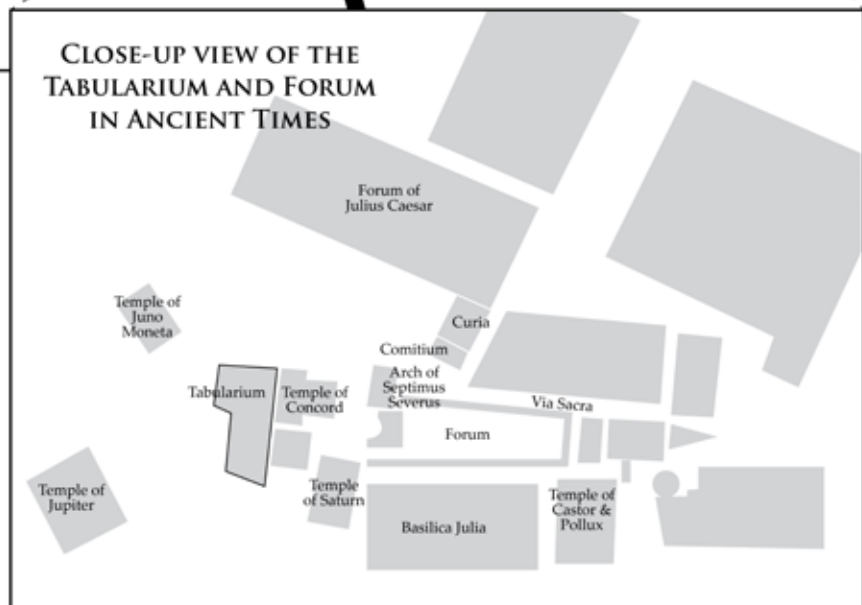
TIMELINE OF EVENTS



MAP OF ROME AND THE SEVEN ANCIENT HILLS



CLOSE-UP VIEW OF THE TABULARIUM AND FORUM IN ANCIENT TIMES



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INTRODUCTION

ROME: 508 BC

For some time the Etruscans hesitated, each looking around at the others to begin. Finally, shame roused them to action, and raising a shout they threw their spears from all sides on their lone enemy. He caught them on his outstretched shield, and with grim determination kept his place on the bridge with firmly planted foot. They were just attempting to get past him by a charge when the crash of the broken bridge and the shout which the Romans raised at seeing the work completed stopped the attack by filling them with sudden panic.

—Livy, *History of Rome from its foundation* 2.10

ROME: 900 YEARS LATER
AUGUST 24, 410 AD

The man hurried down the steps. The city had fallen. It didn't seem possible, but there were things to do. He carried a shield, but not for a fight. The man was too old for that and so was the shield.

It could be a problem, the man realized. Someone might mistake his bearing of arms as a challenge. Soldiers poured into the city: the Visigoths led by their King Alaric. Any soldier that bothered to look closely, however, would see only an old man with a brittle shield.

And it was brittle, though once it had shown the might and spirit of the city through its original owner, Publius Horatius Cocles. That was more than 900 years earlier. It was a miracle the shield existed. Largely made of wood, it had a metallic center. The care given to it over the centuries was clear, but it was a tool of war and showed its use. The wood was punctured in places and even these wounds in its body were preserved. The metal center was dented, but polished. This shield, and its owner, singlehandedly kept Rome's independence on a fateful day when another king came to reclaim the city. That king didn't make it across the river.

Alaric made it into the city and the citizens were in a panic. The man knew a safe place to hide the shield where it could one day be retrieved. He thought Rome could be restored

in perhaps ten or twenty years. In fact it would take close to 1,500 years for Rome to again be the capital of a nation spread throughout the Italian peninsula. Another 50 years after that was needed to reach the same population the city had at its point of greatest influence.

In all those many years, no one found the shield of Publius Horatius Cocles...

YESTERDAY

The kingdom was in ruins. The builder examined the destruction. He relished the thought of building it again and making it better. He looked at the king, who was smiling, as were his knights and everyone in his court. They were all about two inches tall and made of plastic.

Michael thought about where to begin. His previous castle was his best and biggest yet. Like many builders, as soon as he finished the project he started to notice little mistakes and improvements that could be made. There were only so many plastic bricks in the tubs in front of him, but he knew he could still do better.

It would have to wait.

“Michael! Michael!”

“What?”

“We got a letter from Marco!”

“Oh my gosh! That’s always cool. What does it say, Molly?”

Michael and Molly met their distant friend a couple of years before. Marco showed them around his home city of Rome, Italy.

“He invited us for *Natale di Roma*. It’s Rome’s birthday. There’s a big celebration and a lot of things going on around the city. He said the museums don’t charge admission, and there are fireworks too!”

“Sounds like a great time to visit.”

“You think? Yeah, just maybe, silly,” Molly answered with a big smile.

“What did Mom and Dad say?”

“They’re okay as long as we have adult supervision during the big events.”

“Okay, so when should we leave?” Michael asked. When people travel, especially overseas, they have to find flights and worry about airports. Molly and Michael, however, had another way of getting there: a magic suitcase.

The suitcase had seen considerable use over the past couple of years. Rome was actually the first place they went overseas. They had seen so much in the past couple of years. Sometimes Rome seemed like a very long time ago.

But they kept in touch with Marco and it was exciting to think about seeing their friend again. The adventure in Rome was brief and there were many things they didn’t get to see. Unfortunately, if there was a lot going on during *Natale di Roma*, they might need yet another trip to finally get around the

city as much as they wanted. There was just so much history. As Molly thought about it, a third trip probably wouldn't be enough either!

"The events are on Saturday and Sunday. We'll go Friday right after school so we don't get there too late." Traveling by magic suitcase didn't take long, but Rome was several hours ahead on time, so it would be late there when they arrived. Molly added, "Hopefully, we'll be able to sleep okay that night."

They would sleep fine that night and the next, but on the last evening they would be on the run.